

York symposium on education

Six leading educators probe future of education

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What do the nation's leading educators think about the changing role of the university? Should the university become a massive job training centre? Or should it return to its original monastic place in society where only the select few would be permitted to attend the institution?

H. Ian Macdonald called the shots last Thursday at the symposium on higher education, held in the Senate chambers. The setting was right. The soft overhead lights shone meekly towards the academic luminaries seated at the panel desk, while the lesser lights sat attentively in the plush green seats waiting for the drums to roll. York president H. Ian Macdonald, former University of Toronto president Claude Bissell, Ryerson president Walter Pitman, Reva Gerstein, member of the Ontario Council for University Affairs, and former president of University of British Columbia J. B. Macdonald, were all assembled to tell the facts, lay them on the table for all to see, and propose plans of action for the future of universities.

The issue — the survival of the university. The panelists — six universities presidents and senior officials who, one by one, took their feelings to the stand, and said what they thought the university should be. Some were rhetorical and others dwelt on insipid speculations but, through their somewhat confusing and uncommitted speeches the message rang loud and clear — something has to be done to prevent the dissolution of the traditional university.

TRADITIONAL FUNCTIONS

"The survival of the university is at stake. We need to return to the traditional functions of the university to reaffirm our faith in it. The university should be the place where uncompromising discipline prevails in the final years, where students will be

rigorously educated, and where academic decisions will be made by a select few and not by some form of participatory democracy. If these functions are lost, then society will soon discover that it does not serve this purpose and will replace it. Thank-you."

The applause for J. B. Macdonald was spontaneous and long, the audience approving with nods of consent.

Part of the problem facing the universities originated during the middle sixties when society experienced an upward surge in the number of people going to university. Prior to the 60s, the university was considered an elitist structure, while its students proudly regarded themselves as a privileged group.

During the 60s, when massive enrollment figures accompanied the expansion of higher education, society began to form the attitude that education was a right and should be accessible to all interested persons.

"Equality of opportunity" was the key phrase that caused qualitative changes in the university. As a result, enrollment policies were changed to allow more and more students to sift through the admission gates, entitling them to an education that was once reserved for the serious and self-disciplined. Faculty had to be increased to keep up with the new masses; more classrooms and lecture halls were needed; student-teacher ratios climbed higher and higher until finally the quality of education began to drop.

GOVERNMENT PRESSURE

The university, it seems, is in a bad state of affairs, even without the problem of overloaded classrooms.

Reva Gerstein, member of the Ontario Council for University Affairs said the university is burdened with extra pressure from the provincial government to live up to greater financial and academic expectations.

"The rift that exists in government-university relations, has caused the government to think that salary objectives are greater than maintenance ones. Library funds are just as important as salaries."

Another concern, she said, is the fact that governments are not con-



Former U. of T. president Claude T. Bissell tells panel and audience that the Ontario government is not completely to blame for the mess in which univer-

sities presently find themselves. "The problem lies with federal-provincial government relations," he says.

cerned with long-term objectives, an obvious disadvantage for the university.

Claude Bissell, former president of the University of Toronto quickly added that she should not blame the provincial government because they are "not built for long-term objectives and goals. I think the problem lies with poor federal-provincial government relations," he said.

BAD PRESS

The image of the university in society was another point for discussion. What is it? Who is responsible for it? Consensus was that the press was the villain. "It is the press that has coined the phrases 'the fat cats of the university' and 'scholar per dollar', and have given the university a tarnished image," said Gerstein.

Walter Pitman, president of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute sees additional problems facing Ontario universities with the recently-elected minority government. "Both parties (Liberals and Conservatives) ignored the problems of the university in their election campaigns."

Lack of leadership, the panel agreed was another pitfall the university was approaching. "Leadership is disappearing because the presidents are so exhausted with financial problems, that they have nothing left to offer their university in the way of leadership."

All speculation was not dismal, though. Bissell praised universities for taking a stand on such issues as racial discrimination and freedom of speech. But in the same breath he warned, that more action needs to be taken if the universities are to be heard by society. "If we don't, the university will become less heard by politicians, less visible and eventually ignored."

COSMIC QUESTION

As each question was answered by the panel, one could sense a feeling of restlessness in the room. Here were the leaders of four major universities in a room filled with professors and other university officials sitting within an arm's reach of each other, aware of the circumstances that

surround an institution that has served society for 700 years. And there it was, facing them square in the face — the cosmic question of whether universities should sharply reduce enrollment, exercise the strictest of discriminatory powers over tenure and promotion and apply stringent measures over student conduct and return to the cloistered monastic institution it once was. And yet no one mentioned the possibility until J.B. Macdonald took his turn at the lectern and shot the facts point blank at his audience.

BULL SESSIONS

"We must put an end," he said, "to these introductory courses that satisfy the needs for immediate relevance, bull sessions that are treated as educational, and inter-disciplinary courses that swim on the surface of the subject and create the illusion of knowledge. We should not allow unprepared students to use their first year as an expensive aptitude test. These students we should encourage to go elsewhere." The room was quiet.

He continued, "I think we should consider the advantage of a Board of Trustees instead of a Board of Governors. A body external to the

university that listens to the advice and accepts, rejects, or refers it back to the university for further consideration. It would sharpen our focus internally in the institution if we talked to a broad constituency of society and convince that community that what we want to do is in the best interest of that society."

Macdonald called his plans for action a 'bitter medicine' that would revitalize the institution.

LEARNING SOCIETY

Bitter medicine indeed. Macdonald's prescription may well be the only alternative for the university. Society is not equipped to absorb the thousands of university graduates each year and place them in the intellectual milieu that they deserve. The learning society is expanding at a rate faster than the university and the world can cope with.

If the universities decided to re-direct the university's back into the past, there would be serious repercussions for primary and secondary schools, and government funding would be drastically altered.

The side effects would be painful but general health would be recovered.



J. B. Macdonald, former president of the University of British Columbia delivers controversial "bitter medicine" speech.



York history professor Richard Storr makes notes of speeches at symposium. No doubt this too is part of history.